LEGISLATIVE STRENGTHENING IN EL SALVADOR

During a time of profound political change, USAID's efforts to strengthen El Salvador's National Assembly have improved the caliber of legislative deliberations and helped the Assembly emerge from the shadows of its long-standing status as a rubber stamp.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

USAID's legislative strengthening project has helped the Government of El Salvador begin to reweave the country's political fabric in an atmosphere of national reconciliation. By providing technical support, infrastructure improvements, and constituency services, USAID helped the Legislative Assembly in its evolution from rubber stamp to independent body during a period of profound political change. The project is an outgrowth of U.S. foreign policy initiatives to strengthen democratic institutions in developing countries.

The project met its intended goals. Project seminars and workshops, opportunities to observe foreign legislatures in action, information resources, and added staff have increased deputies' knowledge in three key areas: their jobs, the legislative process, and the legislature's relationship with the executive and judicial branches. As a result, the Assembly's deliberations have become more thoughtful and its relations with other branches of government have become more substantive.

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Project infrastructure improvements, such as building additional offices, enabled many members to work more efficiently and meet with constituents for the first time. A project-inspired public awareness campaign has sparked growing citizen interest in the Assembly and increased contacts between constituents and members.

As Assembly members have become more informed, capable, and independent, they have had more influence in El Salvador's transition from authoritarian rule to democratic governance. The Assembly has become a leading forum for debating national issues and a marketplace for exchanging ideas from all political perspectives. The Assembly is an emerging model of compromise, accommodation, and consensus building—essential elements of the democratic process.

The project also faced some hurdles. Principal among them was persuading the dominant party of the wisdom of sharing its power with other groups. Some of the project's resources, particularly the library and the computers, were underutilized. And there was high turnover among legislative analysts hired under the project, in part because of tension with staff who had been there longer. In addition, most bills still originate with the executive, oversight is weak, and legislation passed sometimes needs to be revised because of flaws resulting from still-insufficient staff and deputies' inexperience. Finally, progress has been slow in some instances simply because democratic principles and processes are new to the Assembly.

The lessons learned in conducting the project include the importance of taking into account the country's commitment to democracy, along with its political, social, and economic situation. Other factors critical to success are garnering support from key political leaders for the project, and providing a broad mix of assistance that benefits as many as possible. The Salvadoran experience reinforced the importance of concentrating on reforms within the legislature to ensure that its operations embody the nation's commitment to democratic change. Bolstering the relationship of the legislature with civil society groups and the media, and challenging attitudes and beliefs that undermine an effective, democratic legislature are also critical.

INTRODUCTION

One of El Salvador's legislative deputies prominently displays a submachine gun on the wall behind her desk. The former guerrilla leader, elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1994, keeps it there as a reminder of the cause that led her to seek this office. The weapon symbolizes a time when some Assembly members belonged to groups that confronted their differences at gunpoint. In marked contrast to the recent past, deputies in this Assembly express their differences in words, not bullets.

The Assembly's inclusiveness is the reason for this transformation, according to the four-member Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) team from the U.S. Agency for International Development that visited El Salvador for two weeks in September 1995. For the first time in the Assembly's 170-year history, all major political and ideological groups are participating. As a result, it is the nation's most inclusive governmental body. Today's Assembly also symbolically and practically embodies an important element of the agreement that ended the country's long (1980-92) and bitter civil war: Viewpoints from across the political spectrum had to be incorporated into the nation's governmental institutions and political fabric.

While El Salvador has had a national legislature since achieving independence in 1821, it has almost always played a secondary role to authoritarian leaders, oligarchic interests, and armed forces. Members were elected through a process rife with fraud and based on a winner-take-all format that precluded involvement of opposition groups.[1] Salvadoran legislatures have earned a reputation for rubber-stamping decisions already made in other arenas. Indeed, Assembly deputies have long been referred to as yes-men and "goats, who eat everything and contribute nothing," according to knowledgeable observers.

THE STUDY

The CDIE team went to El Salvador to assess the efforts of USAID and other donors to strengthen the Assembly. This impact assessment is an outgrowth of USAID's increased emphasis on democracy and governance programming in recent years, and the desire to examine systematically for the first time the results of such efforts.

The findings of this study, and similar ones conducted by CDIE teams that traveled to Bolivia, Nepal, the Philippines, and Poland, will be combined in a synthesis report that lays out an analytical framework for future USAID work in legislative strengthening.

El Salvador was selected from among countries representative of USAID experience in legislature support activities. The countries were from every region of the world, at different stages in the process of democratization, and had achieved varying degrees of project success.

The team consisted of a CDIE program analyst with Capitol Hill experience, a consultant with extensive knowledge of Latin American legislatures, a senior manager in USAID's Latin America Bureau, and a development management specialist in USAID's Center for Democracy and Governance.

The team addressed several questions:

- What are the essential features of the legislature and the broader legislative arena (political parties, the electoral process, civil society organizations, and the media) that influences it?

- How has the legislature been performing, and how has it affected democratic reform and consolidation?

- What have USAID and other donors contributed to strengthen the legislature, and how have these efforts influenced democratization?

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[1]A 1962 constitutional reform provided for members to be elected by proportional representation, instead of on a winner-take-all basis. In 1983, there was a second constitutional reform of the legislature and electoral system, which is the basis for the present Assembly's structure and operations.

The team interviewed representatives of all political parties in the national legislature, key legislative staff, officials of the executive and judicial branches, media representatives, civil society organization representatives, political analysts, and staff of the American Embassy and USAID Mission. It also examined documents and material relating to the legislature, the legislative process, and Salvadoran politics in general.

THE ASSEMBLY

To assess legislative strengthening efforts, it is necessary to understand the Assembly's constitutional responsibilities and internal organization, its political context, and its relationship with civil society and the media.

Functions and Internal Organization

El Salvador's 1983 Constitution recognizes the Assembly as the highest power of the state and charges it with major functions, such as to decree, interpret, and reform laws; set taxes and approve the national budget; elect the Supreme Court president and members; and declare war. The constitution also assigns the Assembly responsibility to review actions of the executive and its ministries, thereby embracing the concept of checks and balances among the branches of the government.

The Assembly consists of one chamber with 84 deputies—64 elected from El Salvador's 14 departments (administrative units of the national government) and 20 elected at-large nationally (see box). The Assembly is in session about 11 months a year, and the Assembly's term and each deputy's term lasts three years. Though there are no term limits, deputy turnover is high because of the low salary and low status the job confers, as well as the dominant role party leaders play in candidate selection. Only 2 of the 60 deputies elected in 1982, for example, were still serving after the 1991 election, and in each of the last two assemblies, only about a third of the deputies were reelected.

Assembly members elect a president and a 10-member Governing Board. The Assembly's most powerful body, the board includes deputies representing various party factions. It is responsible for making committee assignments and setting the agenda for and presiding over the weekly plenary session.

The Assembly's 14 standing committees cover subjects such as agriculture, budget, defense, education, environment, foreign affairs, labor, public works, and women and children. They review proposed legislation in their area of responsibility and make recommendations to the full Assembly. Committees are supposed to meet at least weekly, although when agenda items are not critical, they may not meet because of lack of space (There are only four rooms for such purposes.). Committees do not have their own budgets, and their work is hindered by insufficient staff (a total of only 10 technical staff and 6 analysts for all 14 committees). Meetings are closed to the public, although access can be secured by invitation of the committee chair.

Until recently, the Legislative Assembly's *oficial mayor* (senior official) was responsible for support services and day-to-day administration. Though the position has been eliminated, the last person to hold the job is now director of legislative operations. Because of his long service (more than 20 years) he remains powerful. He reports to the Assembly president, acts as secretary of the Governing Board, and supervises all 30 legislative support staff.

Political Context

Assembly actions typically reflect El Salvador's party politics, electoral system, and the commitment inspired by the peace process to build national consensus in the political arena. For example, deputies are elected under a system of proportional representation, in which votes are cast for party lists—not individual candidates. Because deputies represent the country as a whole,[2] they do not have close ties with

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[2]The constitution stipulates that deputies represent "the entire people," rather than constituents of the department from which they are elected.

PROFILE OF THE NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY (1994–97)

Membership **Number of deputies**	84
• Department	64
• Nation at large	20
• Gender	75–M; 9–F
• Religion	all Christian
Length of term	3 years (no term limit)
How elected	from party lists
Political parties*	
• National Republican Alliance (ARENA)	40
• National Liberation Front (FMLN)	14
• Christian Democratic party (PDC)	8
• Social Christian Renovation Party (PRSC)	8
• Democratic Party (PD)	7
• National Conciliation Party (PCN)	4
• Others	3
Committees **Type**	
• Standing	14
• Special	1
Membership	low 9; high 13 (average 11)
Staff	
• Technical	10 for all committees
• Analysts	6 for all committees
Secretariat **Personnel**	269
• Administrative unit	(20)
• Human Resources unit	(229)
• Legislative Support unit	(20)
Budget 1995 (1/1–12/31)	65.09 million colones ($US7.41 million)

* Since 1994, the Assembly's party alignments have changed and new parties have been formed. As a result, ARENA has gained one deputy, and the FMLN and PDC have lost 7 and 10, respectively.

constituents. Voters are frequently ignorant of who represents them and what the legislature does.

Political parties play a key role in the Assembly, as well as in Salvadoran politics in general. Party leaders determine the rank of candidates for the Assembly on party lists and can lower the position of or remove an individual whose loyalty is suspect. Once elected, deputies are subject to strong party discipline, which is reinforced by the many national party leaders who are also members of the Assembly. Party leaders hold regular meetings to discuss positions on issues before the Assembly and typically nominate members from their ranks for appointment to standing committees.

Party strength, particularly that of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), shapes the Assembly's role in important ways. For example, because ARENA members control both the executive and legislative branches, it has been able to prevent the legislature from exercising its *antejuício* power.[3] The legislature's president, moreover, is an ARENA deputy who also heads the Governing Board. In effect, ARENA controls the board, too, because the party has a majority of votes: among the 10 board members are five ARENA deputies, including the president, who is empowered to vote twice. ARENA deputies also preside over the most important standing committees (budget, environment, foreign relations, legislative, political, and public works).

Also shaping the legislature's role is an ideal inspired by the peace process: national reconciliation. Assembly deputies strive for this ideal by seeking broad consensus on all votes. Virtually all votes recorded since the current Assembly began in 1994 have been well in excess of the simple majority required to approve most laws or appointments.[4]

The Role of Civil Society and the Media

The Assembly's interaction with civil society organizations remains limited, largely because special interest groups and deputies do not yet see it as necessary or useful. Deputies and citizens alike have little apparent interest in translating broad issues and concerns into legislative initiatives and lobbying on their behalf— hallmarks of such relationships in countries with more developed democratic institutions. In El Salvador, the interaction is limited largely to discussing constituent correspondence in Assembly plenary sessions. Typically these letters petition the Assembly to redress local grievances; they seldom prompt discussion about underlying generic legislative issues, views on pending legislation, or guidelines for proposed legislation.

Some positive changes in this area have occurred, especially among traditionally powerful groups.[5] The National Association of Private Entrepreneurs (ANEP), a business group much like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, is a

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[3]*Antejuício* is a procedure by which the Assembly can summon cabinet ministers or the president to respond publicly to questions. ARENA deputies have opposed antejuícios, fearing that its use might embarrass their party and the government it heads. This situation lends credence to the idea that the executive and legislative branches may have to be controlled by different parties for the Assembly to be truly independent.

[4]In the Assembly, "consensus" means unanimous approval, exclusive of abstentions. Deputies failed to reach broad consensus in a few recent cases, such as a proposed electoral reform and a value-added tax bill, because their complex and politically sensitive provisions sparked intense disagreement between ARENA and opposition deputies. The tax bill passed with 51 votes (43 were required), while the electoral reform bill has been stalled.

[5]This is not as true of opposition civil society groups, as is illustrated in a case cited by USAID Mission staff. In it, representatives of one opposition group appeared to consider it a new concept that they lobby on behalf of legislation they were supporting *before* the Assembly acted on it. Rather, they seemed to feel that the appropriate thing to do was hold seminars to assess and criticize the results *after* the legislation's passage.

case in point. ANEP has been promoting legislation and the Assembly's role as an independent power—roles characteristic of a lobbying group. Through its research arm, it studies proposed laws and provides comments on them to the Assembly and executive branch. ANEP provides input at Assembly committee meetings and has established contacts with leaders of the Assembly's various factions. Reflecting the spirit of the 1992 peace accords and the evolving dialog between civil society groups and the Assembly, ANEP also provides information on pending or proposed legislation to opposition deputies.

Other players in this changing civil society–Assembly landscape are independent research organizations supported by international and local donors, such as the Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES). Similar to a U.S. think tank, FUSADES's legal studies department develops bills on various subjects, such as privatization and rationalization of economic activity. FUSADES prepares studies supporting proposed legislation as well as publications to educate the country's political and economic elite about changes needed in legislative functions, such as the legal framework.

As with civil society organizations, the relationship between the Assembly and the media has been limited for several reasons. Media ownership is concentrated in the hands of a few individuals who substantially control news coverage. For example, El Salvador's two major newspapers both reflect their owners' essentially conservative views. Likewise, the number of television stations is small, and, according to a former TV reporter, they only recently began to broadcast "hard" news. Few journalists are highly skilled, and little news analysis or investigative reporting takes place. Directly and indirectly, these factors have effectively restricted those who oppose the government or simply disagree philosophically with a given newspaper or TV station from having access to the media. Both government and private sources continue to restrict their paid advertising to "acceptable" media. This has undermined new magazines and other

publications that could provide broader coverage of the current Assembly's diverse political views. A case in point is the magazine *Primera Plana,* which is supported by the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a major opposition party in the Assembly. It failed after 10 months because it could not get advertising readily available to more "acceptable" publications.

Some bright spots do exist. For example, one of the two major newspapers now provides some access to opposition groups and individuals, and one TV station has begun to air dissenting views regularly. Also, at least one magazine now prints discussions of important public issues.

LEGISLATIVE STRENGTHENING

The principal donor assistance to the Assembly is USAID's Legislative Assembly Strengthening project, signed in August 1990 and scheduled to expire in October 1996. The project concept evolved during the late 1980s when the Salvadoran civil war had reached a stalemate, and negotiations were under way to establish a lasting peace. In conjunction with USAID's strategic objective supporting "strengthened democratic institutions and practices," the project seeks "to advance the democratic process in El Salvador by building citizen confidence in democratic institutions...." To achieve this goal, the project concentrates on three areas intended "to strengthen the ability of the Legislative Assembly to engage in more analytical and informed policy dialog internally and with other branches of the government":

- *Technical support:* increased staff, training, and information resources to enable deputies to be more effective legislators

- *Infrastructure improvements:* additional office space, equipment, and upgrades of furniture and physical plant to help deputies do their work more efficiently

- *Constituency services:* professional services, materials, and operational support for a program to improve citizen understanding

of the legislature's role and functions in a democratic society[6]

According to USAID documents, by the end of the legislative strengthening project, deputies will enjoy increased access to policy information, have closer links with the citizenry, play a larger role in overseeing the budget and formulating the national agenda, and have begun to factor citizen concerns and technical analysis into their deliberations.

USAID funding for the project started at $490,000 in economic support funds—money the U.S. Government awards to support its foreign policy goals. Through amendments to the original agreement it has reached a total of $1.85 million. The Salvadoran Government has also supported the project with $485,000 worth of local currency. The Research Triangle Institute, a private contractor, has assisted with the project by providing a resident adviser, short-term technical assistance, and training.

In addition, a technical committee established in 1991, made up of deputies representing the major political factions, coordinates and manages the Assembly's role in project activities. Chaired by an Assembly vice president from ARENA, this committee has played an important part in the Assembly's acceptance of the project and ensuring the fullest and fairest possible use of its resources.

Accomplishments

Much has been accomplished over the life of the project:

- *Technical support.* Eight policy analysts (four for a central research unit, four assigned to major political parties) have been hired and trained, and the Assembly now funds these positions. Dozens of information packages, issues workshops, orientation seminars, and observational training trips have been made available to deputies and key staff. The project has upgraded legislative support functions by, for example, developing a bill–tracking system and a legislative manual and adding books to the library.

- *Infrastructure improvements.* The Assembly's office building has been remodeled and upgraded to provide all deputies with semi-private offices, basic office furnishings, and essential office equipment. An audio system has been installed in the Assembly plenary chamber.

- *Constituency services.* A public–education project has been launched to increase citizen understanding of the deputies' job and the Assembly's role. The Assembly's public relations unit has expanded its public information and outreach activities.

Dozens of deputies and others inside and outside the Assembly attest to the legislative strengthening project's positive effects. They unanimously agree that the technical assistance the project provided has helped increase the deputies' abilities as legislators, thereby enhancing the Assembly's effectiveness. For example, project-supported seminars, workshops, and added staff input have helped the Assembly pass important legislation on judicial reform, family life, and education.

The added staff, training, and information resources have also noticeably improved Assembly debates, which have become more informed and productive. For example, the Assembly president told the CDIE team she was most proud of the unanimous vote (84–0) that climaxed the debate over selecting the president and members of the Supreme Court. Project resources have also helped the Assembly establish a more independent role in national policy formulation. For instance, aided by budget-related information provided in recent years from project-supported seminars, depu-

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[6]Project documents dating from the time of its inception identify nearly a dozen "constraints to an effective National Assembly." The documents closely track and explain the selection of the three areas of project activity.

ties have begun examining the executive's annual budget submission for the first time. The executive has responded by providing greater detail in its budget documents, thus facilitating enhanced Assembly oversight of this key area.

Deputies gave high marks to the project's orientation seminars, held prior to the last two assemblies, and to deputy visits to legislatures in other countries. The seminars and visits abroad taught the deputies about their jobs and facilitated cooperative working relationships among recently bitter political enemies and those with very different economic and social backgrounds. In 1992, for example, five deputies and the senior official visited the legislatures of Chile and Argentina, where they observed strikingly different legislative styles, procedures, administrative systems, and support services. The deputies used ideas from the Chilean legislative manual, which they saw during this trip, in developing the Assembly's own legislative manual.

Deputy comments were equally favorable on the project's infrastructure improvements. Years of underfunding, coupled with the recent increase in the number of deputies from 60 to 84, hindered legislative efficiency. Deputies did not have offices in which to meet constituents or visitors, and office support staff, equipment, furnishings, and supplies were inadequate. These deficiencies were a particular problem for opposition deputies, many of whom did not receive a fair share of the resources. In addition to allowing Assembly members to work more efficiently and improving constituents' access, project infrastructure investments helped promote a sense of equal participation for all deputies. This was especially true of parties represented for the first time, such as the FMLN.

Important project constituency services are also under way. To increase public interest in and understanding of the Assembly, the project has funded TV and radio ads, newspaper columns, a legislative guide, and other publications, such as comic books targeted at primary-school children. As a result of this campaign, more professionals, business executives, school children, and nongovernmental organizations are requesting information about the Assembly.

Other USAID activities have also strengthened the Assembly. For example, the minister of justice told the CDIE team that several executive branch, judicial reform initiatives he and his staff have pursued with USAID have resulted in legislative proposals requiring Assembly approval. As a result, the quantity and quality of executive–legislative branch contacts has improved, paving the way for major legislation. In addition, USAID's Caribbean and Latin American Scholarship Program has recently supported visits to the United States by Salvadoran politicians and nongovernmental organization representatives to engage in policy dialogs with American officials. The first dialog, on the education sector, included ARENA and opposition deputies.[7]

Finally, USAID's legislative strengthening efforts have indirectly contributed to El Salvador's transition from authoritarian rule to democratic governance. The Assembly has become more prominent and independent, a change beginning with the 1991 legislature and accelerating in its 1994 successor. For the first time, for example, the Assembly is a forum for publicly discussing the direction of Salvadoran political, social, and economic development. In this sense, the Assembly is playing a new and important role, modeling democratic concepts such as compromise, accommodation, and consensus building.

Limitations and Problems

The chief limitation to USAID's legislative strengthening project has been ARENA's am-

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[7]In addition to coordinating project-supported trips to other countries through its International Visitors Program, the U.S. Information Service has sponsored visits for deputies and key staff to the U.S. Congress, state legislatures, and media.

bivalence about strengthening the Assembly. In some areas, ARENA deputies have supported efforts to make it effective and independent, while in others they have opposed measures needed to bring about this enhanced role. For example, ARENA deputies have rejected field hearings and other project-mandated contacts to improve constituent-member relations for fear they or their party might be embarrassed by public criticism. Likewise, ARENA deputies have delayed reform of the Assembly's internal rules for more than three years.[8]

The project has also seen some of its resources underutilized. Library staff, for example, revealed that only a handful of deputies and a few legislative analysts had used its resources in 1995. The staff could not recall any use of the library by committee technical staff. Presumably, the library does not contain the kind of information deputies and staff need. Computers purchased with project funds were also underutilized, primarily because the intended users lacked sufficient training.

 The legislative analysts hired under the project also encountered problems and limitations. Committee technical staff and other longtime Assembly legislative personnel initially regarded the analysts with suspicion and resentment. The technical and other staff viewed the analysts as a threat to their status as the Assembly's key support personnel and were upset when the analysts initially were paid more than some of them. Partly because of this tension, analyst turnover has been high; none of the original four assigned to the Policy Research Unit remains. The limited experience of the original analysts and their successors has also restricted their potential. Almost all of the current policy research analysts are recent university graduates trained in law, but none has relevant legislative experience. Not one analyst, for example, is skilled in budget analysis, an important area to the deputies, who believe they need to know more to be able to carry out their oversight responsibilities in this regard.

Finally, some progress has been limited by the Assembly's incipient embrace of democratic principles and processes. By and large, Assembly activities continue to be dominated by the executive branch—in part, a legacy of the government's authoritarian past. Virtually all legislation still originates with the executive, oversight is weak, and what little legislative planning the Assembly does is based on direction from the president and the president's ministers. In addition, legislation passed by the Assembly is often flawed, because of the combination of still-insufficient staff, inadequate preparation time,[9] and lack of deputy expertise. Also, summary records and minutes of plenary sessions are not routinely available to the public, although they can be seen on request.[10]

OTHER DONOR SUPPORT

Other donors have provided limited support for legislative strengthening. Around the time the USAID project began, the European Union provided small grants totaling about $190,000 directly to political parties to enable them to buy basic equipment such as computers, fax machines, and vehicles. The Inter-American

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[8]This ambivalent attitude has also hampered efforts to implement a 1994 USAID-supported Price, Waterhouse study that recommended a major internal reorganization of the Assembly. This struggle within ARENA and between it and other parties is not surprising. Those with political power are always reluctant to see their status diminished.

[9]The Governing Board typically approves agendas for the weekly plenary session only two days in advance. Some deputies also complain that valuable time is wasted in plenary sessions discussing constituent correspondence that is trivial or of no national significance.

[10]No verbatim records of plenary sessions exist, although audio tapes of the proceedings are summarized as official minutes, which are submitted for approval at the next session. The public has shown little interest in these records, which are a cornerstone of accountability in more advanced legislatures.

Development Bank (IDB) is considering possible loan assistance to support legislative strengthening in El Salvador. USAID Mission staff said some of the activities supported under its Legislative Assembly Strengthening project may be continued or enhanced by prospective assistance from the Inter-American Development Bank.

SUMMING UP

The USAID Legislative Strengthening project contributed to the development of El Salvador's Legislative Assembly at a time when it had begun to move away from its long-standing rubberstamp status toward a more independent and purposeful role. The project has helped the Assembly progress by enhancing its ability to be more informed and analytical in its deliberations and relations with other branches of the government. The project concentrated on three main areas—technical support, infrastructure improvements, and constituency services—and met its intended goals in all of them.

Project technical support—seminars, workshops, new staff hires, observation trips, and information resources—has helped deputies become more knowledgeable about their jobs, legislative procedures, and the Assembly's relationship with the executive and judicial branches. Technical support resources have also helped deputies do a better job, for example, in plenary session debates and in analyzing executive branch legislative initiatives. Similarly, the added office space, equipment, and furnishings the project provided have helped deputies work more efficiently; most notably, they now can meet with constituents and others in a setting conducive to this purpose. In the constituency services area, the campaign to promote public awareness and understanding of the Assembly has sparked a growing number of letters and calls from citizens interested in learning more about the Assembly.

Moreover, enhancing the capabilities of Assembly deputies has enabled them to facilitate El Salvador's transition from authoritarian rule to democratic governance. The Assembly now serves as a leading forum for debating significant national issues. Reflecting its inclusive membership, it has become an important marketplace for the airing and exchange of ideas. In these and other ways, the Assembly is an emerging model of compromise, accommodation, and consensus building, demonstrating that conflicting political views and ideas can be addressed peacefully in this recently wartorn country.

LESSONS LEARNED

USAID's Legislative Assembly Strengthening project in El Salvador suggests several important lessons and ideas for further consideration:

1. Take into account the country's commitment to democracy. Successful legislative strengthening depends on careful analysis and planning. Efforts must incorporate a country's political, social, and economic situation, and be flexible when circumstances arise that are neither predictable nor easily controlled. In El Salvador, the USAID project could not have been as successful as it was without the 1992 peace accords and the 1994 election. The accords made it possible for all factions to participate in Salvadoran politics, while the election fulfilled that potential by seating representatives of all major political groups in the national legislature for the first time.

2. Support from legislative leaders is vital. Initial and ongoing support from legislative leaders, political parties, and key staff is essential. In the USAID project, a technical committee composed of deputies representing all major factions served as the contact point. This was critical to gaining acceptance from the Assembly and ensuring the fullest and fairest possible use of assistance. In contrast, the ambivalence of leaders from the country's dominant party, ARENA, toward the project was its biggest hurdle.

3. Consider the overall needs of the legislature. While concentrating primarily on technical assistance, such as staff, training, and information resources, the project also supported other major areas, including infrastructure im-

provements and constituency services. In the Assembly's case, much of the project's success can be traced to its responsiveness to the priorities it identified.

4. Design in sustainability wherever possible. Project activities should promote ownership so that once USAID assistance ends, the legislature assumes responsibility for outcomes. In El Salvador, for example, the Assembly agreed at the outset to pay for USAID-funded legislative analysts by the end of the project.

5. Ensure that assistance benefits as many as possible, equally. Assistance must be even-handed to ensure it benefits as many legislators as possible. Providing office space, for example, enabled all deputies to carry out their legislative functions more efficiently and helped those of parties participating for the first time feel like equal partners.

6. Don't ignore institutional reform. Legislatures that have functioned with only one party or been dominated by one party will likely have internal rules and operating procedures inimical to democratization. Modernizing or reforming these vestiges of the past is critical, although the project's record on this score was mixed. The project was unable to overcome ARENA members' resistance to internal rules reforms because members perceived the reforms as threats to ARENA's power.

7. Focus "outside the walls," too. An effective democratic legislature seeks and uses input from individuals and interests beyond the institution itself, such as civil society and the media. In El Salvador, civil society and the media play such a minor role that there is little impetus for the Assembly to be more accountable and transparent. To build public confidence in the legislature as a democratic institution, groups representing all parts of the political spectrum should know how to initiate contacts with legislators. And legislators should learn how to respond to and incorporate the input from this interaction.

8. Look for ways the legislature can promote democratic change. The degree to which the legislature operates under democratic principles serves as an example for political development in other areas. For example, the closed, exclusive process Salvadoran political parties use to choose candidates for the Assembly diminishes the Assembly's stature as an institution fully committed to democratic principles of openness and inclusiveness.

9. Challenge existing attitudes and beliefs. Confronting assumptions that undermine an effective, democratic legislature is critical to the success of legislative strengthening. This was underscored in discussions with one of the Assembly's most senior staff members. He was not concerned that complete records of Assembly plenary sessions do not exist, that those that are kept are unavailable to the public, and that there is no public demand for such information. While the Assembly has begun to appreciate such new concepts as constituent-member relations, Salvadoran political thinking does not yet embrace compiling complete records of proceedings as a tool for accomplishing legislative goals and building public confidence in the legislature.